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# THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF EDUCATION REFORM IN CALIFORNIA

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## I. Ecology as a Metaphor for Understanding Education Policy

Ecological understanding acknowledges the interdependence of various systems at play in a given locale. In a forest, birds build nests in trees from dead twigs, feed their young insects that depend upon the same trees for food. The trees, in turn, are fertilized by guano and by the bark and leaves whose decay is hastened by the grubs and worms that inhabit the forest floor. The interdependence of these systems suggests the importance of balance. This is so in two ways.

First, balance or stasis is the normal state of any ecological system, and systems out of balance soon recalibrate. Ecological systems are self-correcting. They accommodate internal changes and even a wide range of exogenous shocks. Over the centuries, for example, California redwood forests have endured long periods of drought, periodic fires, and floods. In each case, system balance is restored after a time, sometimes (as in the case of fires) more durable than before. Second, we have also come to understand that certain kinds of change can alter the eventual equilibrium of ecological systems in fundamental terms.

Long term climate changes, for example, can lead to the extinction of some species and the emergence of others as dominant. Additionally, in this context, we have found that intervention in an ecological system sometimes produces unanticipated results. The elimination of predators in some locales, for example, has led to exploding populations of rodents and a reintroduction of diseases that were thought to have been eradicated. In these cases, while a new equilibrium is indeed reached in time, that equilibrium reflects a very different reality, an alteration in the character of the region that may not be either intended or desired.

One might examine educational change in California in the same terms. Over time, the ecology of schooling in California, as in the rest of the nation, has proved itself remarkably durable when faced with both changing internal dynamics and exogenous change. Large-scale policy changes have had important effects on schools, no doubt, but the fundamental character of the educational system has remained intact. Proposition 13, perhaps the most profound policy shift in the history of California education, altered the financing of schools but did little to change what David Tyack and Larry Cuban have called the "grammar of schooling."<sup>1</sup> Yet other changes, some purposeful and some not, have challenged the ecology of schooling in California in more profound, system-altering ways.

The strong increase in the numbers of children for whom English is a second language is an example of one such shift, making language learning and literacy predominant areas of concern within the curriculum in the state's urban schools. Purposeful actions, like the late

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<sup>1</sup> David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

reduction in class size in the early elementary grades, are having similar ripple effects through the ecological systems that comprise California's educational environment. In ways that parallel the ecological metaphor, reduced class size brings untrained teachers in to classrooms in the short run, puts pressure on schools and colleges of education to produce more teachers, and results in the creation of new organizational forms (habitats in the ecological metaphor) to provide training.

Any analysis of California's educational policy prospects must appreciate the ecological nature of the policy environment and the interdependence among the different elements of the state's school system. In particular, such analyses must seek to differentiate between changes or prospective changes that alter the fundamental "balance of nature" and those which effect modest adjustments within the existing framework.

## II. Climate Changes

Economy of scale has long been the logic of American industry. From the development of mass production to the creation of conglomerates, big companies meant big profits. But beginning in the late 1970's, more nimble and aggressive competitors ambushed American business every market. Size, it seemed, was no longer the *sine qua non* of profitability, much less of productivity.<sup>2</sup> In industry after industry, firm after firm, command and control gave way to local decision-making and more decentralized authority. "Bureaucracy" and "middle management" became terms of derision as newly empowered "autonomous business units" set about "reengineering" their own operations with a clear focus on the bottom line.<sup>3</sup>

While trends and sub-trends have followed, the major outlines of the movement to smaller, more autonomous units accountable to market forces--rather than to hierarchy--has prevailed and has penetrated the logic of government as well as private industry. The entrepreneurial firm and the entrepreneur herself have become iconic in American life in much the same way the "captains of industry" had been at the turn of the century. Our image of what a business is supposed to look and feel like has shifted.

This shift in the look and feel of business has had a marked impact on ideas about education and education policy. No clearer case can be made for a "climate shift" in education policy than by looking at the case of vouchers. The idea of giving families a sum of money to spend on the school of their choice has a 200-year history.<sup>4</sup> In this country, economist Milton Friedman proposed vouchers in the early 1960s. Despite occasional attempts to institute voucher programs at either the local or state level, vouchers have never won widespread approval. This year, for the first time, national polls suggest that a majority of voters support the idea of

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<sup>2</sup> Rosebeth Moss Kantor, When Giants Learned to Dance: Mastering the Challenge of Strategy, Management and Careers in the 1990s (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Tom Peters and Robert Waterman Sr., In Search of Excellence: Re-engineering the Corporation (New York: Warner Books, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978).

vouchers, and at the same time scholarship programs designed to create “vouchers” from private funds have increased in popularity.<sup>5</sup>

In California, the struggle over vouchers has been defined as a battle between public schools and private schools and, as the 1994 defeat of a voter initiative to implement vouchers demonstrated, Californians were unwilling, and may still be, to spend public money on private schools. Yet what is remarkable, in the context of climate shift, is the runaway victory of the “idea behind the idea” of vouchers, namely the importance of familial choice, on the one hand, and of small, autonomous schools ruled by market forces, on the other. It is this idea that undergirds virtually every reform effort currently underway in California, from charter schools at the state level, to the LEARN reform program (see below) in Los Angeles. All seek to support autonomous planning and decision-making at the school level, shaped by engagement with local stakeholders. In this changing climate, the role of school districts, and especially county districts, becomes problematic. The November 1998 ballot initiative designed to limit expenditures by district “bureaucracies” was simply an organized statement of a widely held concern that districts offices, like giant corporate headquarters, are antiquated and expensive luxuries.

A second climate shift at play in California has similarly ancient roots. Uniform standards, and the means to measure student progress toward those standards, have been the holy grail of education reformers since the beginning of the century and the rise of the testing movement. Here, too, a longstanding debate over whether there should be uniform standards and whether any assessment could adequately measure achievement has given way to a debate over which standards and what test. As with choice and autonomy, the basic “idea behind the idea” has ceased to evoke controversy, signaling a basic shift in the ecological framework of the education system.

The third major climactic shift in California’s educational ecology is the demographic shift already mentioned. So-called “minorities” will be majorities in California schools within ten years, and in Los Angeles such is already the case. From the descendents of the Californios and the native peoples of the State to the most recent immigrants from Asia and Latin America, California has come to reflect the population mix of the planet more closely than the population mix of the United States. This trend has placed new burdens on schools. Significantly, many students from immigrant families come to school with little or no English, and many are equally burdened by poverty. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Californians must remember that we are not the first state to face the challenge of an influx of non-English students, nor are we the first to face the challenge of multiple cultures existing, or seeking to exist, in a single environment. What is different about the present state of education in California is our expectation that we will educate all of these children to be competitive for jobs and for higher education. Here what has shifted fundamentally is the climate of expectation about the future of this amazing demographic mix.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel McGroarty, “Education Reform Goes Private,” pp. 14-18 and Chester Finn and Bruno Manno, “Your Money and Your Life,” pp. 18-23, Philanthropy, Vol. XII, No.4, September 1998.

Prior to the current era, Americans remained contented with an educational system that encouraged a few children, mostly Anglo children of means, to excel, while the majority left school for semi-skilled or unskilled jobs in the industrial and agricultural sectors. Today, we judge such a system to be not just morally, but economically, unacceptable. Although expansion in some service sector jobs continues to provide opportunities for uneducated workers, the vast majority of well-paid jobs created in California require a kind of intellectual dexterity acquired only through formal education. This attitude shift, in turn, has pressed schools and teachers to do what they have not done before: create means by which children who would in past eras have been sorted out of the educational system will instead succeed.

### **III. Technology in Education**

Far less certainly “climactic,” despite promises to be so, have been changes in technology within the educational environment. Although they have altered fundamentally many aspects of American life and although they have contributed to the decentralization and in some cases the de-institutionalization of American business, advances in technology have not yet had the same effect on schools. For the most part, advances in technology have been expensive and hence inaccessible to the vast majority of schools.

Ironically, in California, the home of the computer, software, and telecommunications industries, ratios of computers to students are the lowest in the nation. Despite this seeming deficiency, despite analyses that suggest it would take upwards of \$6 billion in one time expenditures and annual expenditures of more than a billion dollars thereafter to bring technology use in schools up to the current level of business, and despite only limited evidence that computer use improves student achievement, it has become an article of faith that technology is one important key to educational improvement.<sup>6</sup> In this case, the significant climate change is in the perception of the public about what does and does not make for educational progress. Within this new climate, to not spend money on technology is an act of courage on the part of administrators and legislators.

Yet there are signs of a shift in practice that may portend an actual climate change in the use of technology. Policy initiatives directed at making internet access ubiquitous in schools hold the promise of altering the way computers are used, moving beyond the computer-as-workstation (and workbook) to the computer-as-resource. With access to the internet, small schools in even poor areas in the state can have access to the libraries of the University of California, the art of the Getty Museum, and the photographs of the latest NASA exploration of space. As the hardware fades into the background in the classroom and the information it accesses becomes the foreground, the computer revolution may finally and truly transform schools in the same way it has helped to change business: by breaking the logic of scale economies.

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Cuban, How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1980 (New York: Longman, 1984).

#### **IV. Policy Climatology: The Example of Class Size Reduction**

Many of the most aggressive policy formations of the last several years attempt to respond to one or another aspect of these climate changes. In some cases, as in the expansion of the charter school law to embrace more schools and to give these schools even more autonomy, these policy efforts aim at accelerating change. In others, such as the move to restrict bilingual education, policies have a more mixed meaning. In all cases, recent policies have created both anticipated and unanticipated effects in the educational ecology. No policy reflects this mixed result better than California's efforts to reduce the size of its elementary school classrooms in order to provide more individual attention to students during the critical early years.

When she ran successfully for Superintendent of Public Instruction, Delaine Eastin campaigned to cap the enrollments in California's elementary school classrooms. Following her election, and the election of Pete Wilson as Governor, the issue of class size reduction gathered strength among parents and voters. Both leaders worked hard to "own" the issue, with Wilson eventually carrying the day with legislation that limited enrollments to twenty students per class in grades 1-3.

What Wilson and Eastin had in mind was to continue the trend of reducing the scale of educational enterprise at the micro-level, making classrooms more intimate and by inference, more effective. Among the many interesting features of the class size reduction initiative is the paucity of research demonstrating a positive effect from smaller class sizes. Still, support abounds for extending the class size reduction to fourth grade, and for capping high school class size in core subjects. This support reflects the changed climate in which voters and parents (and teachers, too) associate small with effective, independent of any empirical evidence.

In its rush to reduce class size, Californians may in fact be creating a system that is less effective and in the process missing a true opportunity to recast the ecology of schooling in favor of small, autonomous schools. First, as is well known, the drive to reduce class size has created an explosion in the demand for new teachers, a demand that far outstripped the traditional sources of supply, namely the California State University (CSU), the University of California (UC), and the private colleges and universities. As a result, districts throughout the state have hired a staggering number of teachers without certification.

These teachers, numbering in the tens of thousands, hold emergency certificates and promise, in their contracts, to accumulate the necessary coursework within a stipulated period of time. Many of these "emergency certified teachers" are fine educators and their students benefit enormously from their work. Others are not as well established in their classrooms, and it is doubtful that their students are receiving a net benefit from class size reduction. They would have been better off in a slightly larger classroom with a more qualified teacher. Not until we better understand the data from these students' test profiles will we be able to understand the cost/benefit tradeoff to class size reduction for this generation of students.

One might expect that over time, a dynamic system will correct for the one-time aberration in the demand for teachers, and there is evidence to suggest that this is the case. In the short run, the ecology has responded to the demand perturbation by creating new organizational forms to train those teachers serving with emergency credentials. CSU and UC have developed innovative “on the job” apprenticeship programs for these would-be professionals, and the nimbler private universities have led the way in the development of distance learning approaches. Most significantly, out of both self interest and concern for the profession and the children, local teachers’ unions have created certification programs of their own, in this way reestablishing their role as both arbiters and supporters of quality teaching. The perturbation in the market for teachers has produced an unprecedented amount of organizational innovation in institutions not known for their interest in innovating. It remains to be seen whether these innovations are short-term adjustments or whether they reflect a longer-term evolution of the system whereby California produces and certifies teachers.

In two areas, the shock created by class size reduction has not called forth corresponding adjustments, either long term or short term. First, despite a huge increase in demand, and a shortage of supply, there has been virtually no adjustment of the price districts pay for teachers. Second, the regulatory environment in which teacher certification takes place has been slow to respond to the need for more flexible routes to teaching. In both cases, marginal change, “signing bonuses” in some districts, for example, and “experimental” certification programs reflect an inclination to respond, but they are not of the scope one might hope for or expect. Proposition 8 on the November 1998 ballot was designed to replace certification requirements with a subject matter competency test, effectively opening the teaching ranks to all college graduates. If passed, Proposition 8 will solve the problem of supply, but perhaps not the more difficult problem of quality.

As significant as the increase in teacher demand has been for the traditional supply chain, a second impact may paradoxically lock Californians into big schools at the very time they are acting to create small educational environments. The rapid implementation of class size reduction meant that most schools had to acquire new facilities, fast. After cannibalizing school libraries, art rooms, and in too many cases, large storage rooms, school districts turned to portable classrooms as the solution to their facilities needs. These portables, in turn, ate away at blacktop or lawn areas, reducing the outdoor space available to students and “urbanizing” their educational environment. In its rush to accomplish one good thing, California lost critical opportunities accomplish several good things at once, and in particular, sacrificed the opportunity to create smaller schools, more closely linked to neighborhoods and more accountable to local communities.

## **V. The Ecology of School Reform in Los Angeles**

School reform in Los Angeles is best understood in ecological terms, and at its best seeks to employ ecological thinking. As elsewhere in the state, there is broad consensus on the need to improve public schooling in the city, yet divergence when it comes to means.

The context is significant. Enrollments in the schools of Los Angeles County topped 1.5 million in 1997-8. Half of these students attend school in a single district, Los Angeles Unified, and nearly half of them have a first language that is not English. The majority of students in LA Unified are non-white while the majority of teachers are white, and Los Angeles County employs half of the state's emergency credentialled teachers. Most striking of all is the mobility rate among students in Los Angeles, where estimates suggest that a significant proportion of students, perhaps even thirty percent, change schools or leave the system altogether in the course of a year. Each of these elements of the educational environment in Los Angeles challenges the ability of the school system to produce students able to rise to the challenge of the modern workplace.

Evidence about outcomes is mixed.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand over the last decade, dropout rates have fallen and the percentage of graduates completing the basic requirements for admission to the UC and CSU systems has risen. On the other, SAT scores have declined while the scores of students in comparable urban districts in the state, like San Francisco, have risen. Unfortunately, further longitudinal comparisons of outcomes are nearly impossible given an ever-changing assessment plan at both the local and state levels. In 1998, the state adopted a single assessment instrument, the Stanford 9 test, that will, over time, give educators, parents, and policy makers at least one stable metric by which to measure aggregate progress or regress.

In Los Angeles, frustration about what they saw as consistent under-performance by the Los Angeles Unified School District, led educators and business leaders to create, in 1990, the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now (LEARN). Spearheaded by Richard Riordan, then a private citizen and later mayor, and Robert Wycoff of ARCO, LEARN set about not only to reform the district, but to create a new process of reform, one that combined business methods with political advocacy. LEARN quickly brought around the table representatives of the District, its collective bargaining units, and leaders of significant community organizations. ARCO led other businesses in providing LEARN with operating capital, and Wycoff was elected chairman of a twenty person working group or executive committee. Together they hired Mike Roos, then Speaker Pro Tem of the California Assembly, to head the effort and McKinsey and Company to do an international study of best practices in the area of urban schooling.

The McKinsey study provided California's first systematic, business-style analysis of best practices, and it yielded detailed information about organizational structure, teacher professional development, student assessment, budgeting, planning, and even facilities use.<sup>8</sup> The study findings became the text for a broad community conversation about schools in Los Angeles that enrolled over six hundred civic leaders as LEARN Trustees. This broader group, with leadership from Roos and his colleagues, created a final set of recommendations for reform and sent them to the School Board for a vote. The political campaign to secure Board support of the LEARN recommendations included mail, television, and community meetings. Together, these efforts were persuasive. In the spring of 1992, the Board adopted the LEARN reforms by a unanimous 7-0 vote.

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<sup>7</sup> Statistics below from the California Department of Education.

<sup>8</sup> Los Angeles Alliance for Restructuring Now, For All Our Children: Better Educational Results in the Los Angeles Schools (Los Angeles: LEARN, 1992).



What the Board approved, and what the community trustees supported, was a McKinsey finding that schools around the world that worked best in serving their communities and their students were small schools operating with great autonomy. From Edmonton, Ontario, to Greensboro, North Carolina, McKinsey found and was taken by the ability of small schools acting autonomously to deploy their resources in ways custom fit to the needs of their children. This idea, so much a part of today's climate change in California, was at the heart of the reform movement in Los Angeles.

School leaders and reform leaders soon discovered that decentralization, the process of creating more autonomous schools, was easier in theory than in practice. At the structural level, disaggregating the district's \$6 billion budget proved to be a daunting technical and technological task. Creating waivers of the union contract regarding the placement of teachers and administrators, waivers that allowed schools in the LEARN program to select their own staff, proved difficult when the number of LEARN Schools approached half of the district. At the operational level, principals had never been trained to lead autonomous business units; teachers had rarely been asked to participate in broad discussions of educational priorities and strategies. Parents, who had been effectively locked out of educational decision-making, were now invited to participate, but with little perspective other than that gained through the experience of their own children. Training became a major imperative of the LEARN reform movement.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in many schools, the prospect of change threatened to destabilize the status quo in uncomfortable ways. Teachers in these schools, whose vote determines participation in LEARN, rejected the plan, and turned to other paths in seeking to improve the condition of education.

By 1998, nearly half of the District's 695 schools had become LEARN schools and in those schools, evidence suggests modest improvement in the academic achievement of students. These gains were most apparent in schools that had joined LEARN early on, that is in schools that had had the longest to develop in the reform environment.<sup>10</sup> Other schools, outside of LEARN, participated in alternate reform programs, with mixed results. In the fall of 1998, the Superintendent, Ruben Zacarias, called on every school to declare its reform program of choice, whether LEARN or another "brand," thus signaling the District's intention to be a 100% "reform" district.

Other reform strands, Accelerated Schools, the Coalition for Essential Schools, Site Based Management, the designs of the New American Schools Development Corporation, and individual charter schools all have gained adherents in Los Angeles. Most significant here is that they all reflect the climate changes identified above. Whatever their differences, all promote the establishment of autonomous schools, able to control their budgets and their personnel, accountable to parents and the community for helping students achieve against articulated goals. Here, again, the distinctions between these reform "brands" should not obscure the root similarity of their ideology.

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<sup>9</sup> For the sake of full disclosure, Professor William Ouchi and the author designed the first training program for LEARN, the School Management Program, a collaboration of the Anderson School at UCLA and UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

<sup>10</sup> Information from various LEARN Documents.

## VI. Prospects for the Future

Los Angeles, like nearly every big city school system, faces continuing difficulties owing to its basic demographics. Increasing numbers of students from vastly diverse backgrounds and high rates of mobility among these students combine with shortages of qualified teachers and lack of appropriate facilities to keep urban schools in a web of frustration, if not outright despair. Even in schools that have successfully navigated their way to significant autonomy, resource constraints make it difficult to achieve the results they hoped for or the results the community demands. California schools remain under-funded in comparison to schools in other states, and the earmarking of new funds for class size reduction precludes expenditures on other, often more promising alternatives. The reform of education in Los Angeles must be and should be categorized as ongoing, reflecting the continuing evolution of the educational ecology. Three examples stand out.

First, the movement to create common standards for student achievement has spawned parallel initiatives for teacher and administrator accountability in Los Angeles and elsewhere. The discussion of sanctions, what happens when students or teachers do not make appropriate progress toward achieving the standards, has already begun to dominate policy debates. For students, these debates surround the practice of "social promotion," whereby underachieving students are promoted to the next grade level in order to prevent the stigma of being "held back." At both the state and local level, the prohibition of social promotion has become an article of faith. Implementing a "no social promotion" policy, however, will have major implications for school facility usage and for the school budget. In Chicago, where "no social promotion" was first implemented broadly, failure rates climbed above 30% in some schools. These students were placed in a required summer remediation program, at district expense. Such a massive expenditure in Los Angeles would destabilize the school budget, and would create logistical impossibilities in the District's year-round schools.

For teachers and administrators, the accountability movement has created pressure for new kinds of contracts, based in part on pay for performance as well as for knowledge and skills. Already this Fall, requests by the teachers' representative, United Teachers Los Angeles, for a pay hike, has been countered by the Board with a request for a new contract in which a part of a teacher's pay would be linked to student performance.<sup>11</sup> Senior administrators in the District, meanwhile, have already linked a portion of their pay to aggregate district performance benchmarks.

Central to any of these accountability efforts is a robust and agreed-upon set of metrics that measure student achievement, teacher achievement, and other indicators of school performance. Such metrics are particularly important in the new ecology of schools in which district bureaucracy is being replaced by autonomous schools. As controls are loosened on the front end, accountability can only be achieved by understanding outcomes at the back end. To

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<sup>11</sup> Doug Smith, "Unions Push for Raises is Swaying School Board," Los Angeles Times, October 3, 1998, p. B1.

date, no such metrics exist, and without them, no broad public policy of accountability is possible.

Second, the movement for small, autonomous schools and classrooms has created opportunities for the private sector either to replace or partner with the public schools. In the former instance, national education “brands,” like the Coalition for Essential Schools, sell their reform packages to schools and districts and in return, the customer schools receive technical assistance and access to a network of like-minded reformers, as well as a basic design for school improvement. “Make or Buy” decisions that have been common to business are now becoming elements of discourse in schools and the District office. In the latter case, companies like Edison and EAI have begun discussions with the District to manage schools in Los Angeles under contract. Such contracts have been highly controversial where negotiated. The very fact of the discussions in Los Angeles signals an important shift in thinking. Meanwhile, at a much lower level of controversy, companies including Sylvan Learning and Kaplan have added to their business model, which typically aims at individuals and families. They now solicit “wholesale” contracts from newly autonomous schools within Los Angeles and from the District itself. Whether this trend toward embracing private providers represents a minor adjustment or, instead, the first signal of a major climate change, remains to be seen.

Finally, this climate change that has operated at the school level to demand smaller administrative and educational environments operates in similar fashion in Los Angeles at the district level. Calls for the breakup of the Los Angeles Unified School District have their roots in the same rejection of the logic of economies of scale. At one level, this makes great sense. If small schools are better, then why not small districts? At another, there is no evidence that small districts promote better student learning. On the other hand, there is a powerful accounting argument that a number of small districts would cost more to administer than the one large LAUSD, taking funds out of the classroom and putting them into the central offices of the decentralized districts.

Each of these unfinished debates, over accountability and over district size, will have an important impact on the education of children in Los Angeles. Each side of each debate reflects good intentions and high purpose, and has drawn forth a sophisticated civic conversation about education in Los Angeles. Taken together, the ground on which the debates take place, acceptance of accountability as a concept and the acceptance of the idea of small autonomous school organizations, underscores the broader changes in the ecology of education in California.